

LOCH LOMONDSIDE DEPICTED AND DESCRIBED

1. MYTHS, MARVELS AND MONSTERS

JOHN MITCHELL

22 Muirpark Way, Drymen, Glasgow G63 0DX

“Hadst thou a genius on thy peak,
What tales, white-headed Ben,
Could'st thou of ancient ages speak,
That mock the historic pen”

from ‘Ben Lomond’
Thomas Campbell (1777-1844)

INTRODUCTION

In this, the first of what is planned as a short series of articles on Loch Lomondside, I intend to focus attention on some of the more persistent legends and strange phenomena associated with the area. When most of these traditional tales which make up Loch Lomondside's folk history were first told is lost in the mists of time. Today, one can only examine the stories as passed down by the printed word and attempt to seek alternative interpretations rather than reject their authenticity outright. Whereas the ‘myths’ would appear to be exactly that, plausible explanations can at least be offered for the loch's much exalted three ‘marvels’. As to whether or not the third deepest loch in Scotland has its own very reclusive large lake creature or ‘monster’, is left to the reader's personal convictions in such matters.

THE MYTHS

One of the earliest descriptions of Loch Lomond is to be found in the *Historia Britomum* attributed to Nennius, a late 8th century Welsh cleric (Todd, 1848). According to Nennius - or just as likely, one of his translators - the loch contained sixty islands or rocks, with an ‘eagle’ on every one. Although the number of islands and birds is an obvious exaggeration, there could well have been strong populations of Ospreys *Pandion haliaetus* L. and White-tailed Eagles *Haliaeetus albicilla* L. nesting on Loch Lomondside at that time. What transformed the story with a probable underlying grain of truth into the realms of fantasy was its embellishment by the mid-12th century chronicler, Geoffrey of Monmouth. In his version of Nennius in *Historia Regum Britanniae*, portentous events in the kingdom were foretold by the eagles shrieking in concert (Giles, 1842). But then, one would expect nothing less of Geoffrey of Monmouth's fertile imagination which gave the world the stirring legend of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table.

The survival of this next piece of local folk-lore is owed to John Dewar - a gaelic speaking woodsman from Rosneath - who, in the mid 19th century, was engaged by the Duke of Argyll to gather and write down the regional oral stories before they were forgotten and lost. Dewar died at Dumbarton in 1872, being described on his death certificate as a ‘Collector of Traditions’ (MacKechnie, 1964). In this particular tale, the

long struggle for dominance between Scotland and England is portrayed as an epic battle between two bulls on the upper slopes of Ben Vorlich above Loch Lomond. During the fight a huge boulder became dislodged, rolling down the hillside before coming to rest near the shore (Campbell, 1862). The ‘Stone of the Bulls’ NN 325137 is better known now as the ‘Pulpit Rock’, for in 1825 a deep recess was carved into the eastern face of the boulder from which the Minister of Arrochar periodically preached to his furthest flung parishioners (Douglas, 1971).

The existence of a fairy people with supernatural powers was once widely accepted throughout Scotland. Place names derived from the gaelic word for fairy *sithean* abound, two local examples being Shian NS 550899 (Johnston, 1904) and Shemore NS 344884 - the big fairy knoll (Irving, 1928). Dark tales about the fairies abducting children were still being perpetuated on Loch Lomondside as late as the 19th century, although Teignmouth (1836) considered the prime intention of preserving the mystic awe was to deter the inquisitive from venturing into certain spots where illicit whiskey stills were concealed. Not all fairies had malevolent reputations. Those which resided around the Fairy Loch NS 338994, a small hillside tarn just north of Inverbeg, were said to dye sheeps' wool or newly spun yarn to the desired hue if left by the waters' edge overnight; and that before departing for ever to their subterranean otherworld, they emptied the contents of their last colour cauldron into the tiny loch. This is the explanation usually offered for objects lying in the deeper water appearing a distinct shade of blue (McLeod, 1884). MacGregor (1927) recounts an almost identical tale, but of a small pool NN 269092 at Lag Uaine - the green hollow - between Ben Ime and Ben Vane. The Fairy Loch was once a popular locus for organised excursions, the Natural History Society of Glasgow visiting the site on at least three occasions (Lee, 1913, 1943 & 1946). Despite this attention, no satisfactory solution was ever arrived at for the tarn's colour phenomenon. Reluctantly setting aside the popular story, the water of the Fairy Loch is remarkably free of organic material, its exceptional clarity favouring the transmission of light towards the blue end of the spectrum.

THE MARVELS

“Waves without wind,
Fish without fins
and a floating island”.

There cannot be many people acquainted with Loch Lomond who are unfamiliar with its trio of marvels. They may not be aware however, that there were originally four; the Abbot of Cirencester, Alexander Necham (1157-1217), having asserted that a stick thrown into the waters of the loch would turn into stone (Gibson, 1695). Such a tall tale as wood transmuting instantly into stone was eventually rejected, but the other three marvels have been kept going in one form or other over the years. Not that such wonders were exclusive to Loch Lomond from the beginning. A very early map, prepared by an unknown English cartographer in the mid 14th century, assigned three rather similar phenomena - a floating island, fish without intestines and a passage (sail) without wind - to Loch Tay (Parsons, 1958). That three marvels became firmly attributed to Loch Lomond is thanks to Hector Boece (1465?-1536), Canon of Aberdeen Cathedral and Principal of the City's new university. Working from the manuscript collection of Glasgow born Bishop Elphinstone, Boece's *Historia Scotorum* was first published in Paris in 1527. At the request of King James V, the *Historia* was translated from the original latin into vernacular scots by John Belleden and reissued at Edinburgh in 1536. After giving a physical description of Loch Lomond, Boece goes on to say ... “and in this loch ar three notable thingis; fische swomand but [without] ony fin; ane richt dangerus and storme wal(wave), but [without] ony wind; and ane Ile that fletis(floats) heir and thair as the wind servis” (Maitland, 1831).

The waves without wind may be accounted for by seiches, which can occur when a particularly strong wind suddenly drops, allowing the 'piled-up' water on the windward side of the loch to move back in the opposite direction. In very extreme cases the displaced water will over-shoot the far shoreline, before turning again in the original direction, the loch surface continuing to oscillate until the momentum is lost. The duration of a seiche is generally short, but on 26 February 1990 when the water level was unusually high, one was observed to last well over 12 hours (Curran & Poodle, 1991). Seiches can also be triggered by violent movement of the earth's crust. A well documented Loch Lomond example was recorded on the morning of 1 November 1775 and coincided with a major earthquake in Lisbon. Without warning Loch Lomond suddenly rose by 0.7m, then dropped away to a low level normally seen only during prolonged droughts. Fluctuations of the loch level continued at five minute intervals for an hour and a half before finally subsiding (Colquhoun, 1756).

It is perhaps understandable that most writers in the past have interpreted Boece's 'fish without fins' as 'serpents', adds *Vipera berus* L. being formerly common on the loch's larger, less wooded islands (Lumsden & Brown, 1985). Lamond (1923) was apparently the first to suggest that this unusual fish was more likely to be the River Lamprey or Lampern *Lampetra fluviatilis* L. which are abundant in Loch Lomond. That the local River Lamprey population is unique - the only population in Britain to undergo its parasitic phase in fresh water instead of migrating to the sea (Maitland, 1983) - adds weight to Lamond's conclusion.

Surging water can and does undermine lakeside vegetation, particularly where a sandy alluvial soil overlies an imper-

vious clay. It seems likely therefore that it is large mats of loosened vegetation breaking away during floods or by storm-driven waves which give rise to stories of 'floating islands'. Hector Boece was almost certainly describing such a natural phenomenon for Loch Lomond. It was later writers, such as John Monipennie (1603), who elaborated on Boece's brief statement, the floating island unaccountably now large enough to support grazing sheep and even cattle. One floating island on Loch Lomond became something of a tourist attraction in the 18th century, a first-hand account being provided by Mary Ann Hanway following a boat trip on the loch in August 1775... “I saw the floating island mentioned by [Tobias] Smollet; it is evidently a part of the bank which the rapidity of the torrent has forced off and carried with it into the lake; it is not large, and often undulates from one side to the other. Sir James [Colquhoun], planted some little trees on it, but they do not thrive, though the sod has a beautiful verdure” (Hanway, 1776). What remains of this particular floating island can still be seen at low water where it settled down (Fig. 1) off the south-west corner of Inchconnachan.

MONSTERS

A belief in the presence of a 'water horse' or 'kelpie' (Gael: *Each Uisge*) in Loch Lomond goes back at least to the early 18th century (Graham, 1724). Despite this early date, Loch Lomond has nothing like the same tradition for an unidentified lake creature as other deep water lochs in Scotland such as Ness or Morar. From a biological standpoint, Lomond's productive waters would be far more capable of sustaining a viable population of exceptionally large animals than any of the deepest lochs in the highlands. Yet all claims that there is *something* in Loch Lomond have been totally overshadowed by the media attention and numerous books written on alleged leviathans in their other more famous Scottish haunts.

It would appear the eye is easily deceived when it comes to possible 'monster' sightings in the loch, more especially when an early morning mist hangs low over the water surface. One Loch Lomond writer (Wood, 1954) pointed to his own experience, after witnessing two horses entering the water and swimming so far out from the shore that they were lost to view. Meaden (1974), looking at British waters in general, considered 'water-devils' (whirling columns of water and spray) provided an alternative explanation for some monster reports. Well developed water-spouts on Loch Lomond are rare, however, the present author having seen only one (21 May 1987) in over 30 years of boating on the loch. Wishful thinking appears to have been responsible for two claimed sightings in the south-east corner of the loch in early July 1968. One was later shown to be a curiously shaped floating log, the other - a succession of 'humps' moving against the current in Balmaha Bay - dismissed by the proprietor of the Balmaha boatyard as nothing more remarkable than a family party of ducks swimming in line (*Lennox Herald* 19 July 1968). An unattributed report of 'two humps' seen in the water off Inchmurrin in September 1972 (Bord & Bord, 1987) lacks sufficient detail for consideration.

An incident involving a long distance swimmer aiming to better the time record held for completing the 36 km length of Loch Lomond occurred in July 1964 (*Lennox Herald* 1 August 1964). The attempt failed when, as it was claimed later, the swimmer was twice attacked by what was claimed to be a giant eel *Anguilla anguilla* L. The then Director of the Glasgow University Field Station was quoted in the press as saying that



Fig. 1. Remains of the Floating Island in the mid 19th century. G.W. Wilson.



Fig. 2. Inveruglas Bay, Loch Lomond.

it was more likely to have been a large Sea Lamprey *Petromyzon marinus* L. (some individuals growing up to a metre in length), known to enter the freshwater loch from time to time.

Taken together, the most compelling Loch Lomond leviathan sightings were both made in Inveruglas Bay (Fig. 2) in the autumn of 1964. In September of that year, a Helensburgh businessman out in the bay was attending to a stalled outboard engine when his wife drew attention to something large in the water moving steadily past their boat and remaining in view for several minutes. When interviewed later, he commented ... "About 10 yards from us this giant thing was slowly swimming in the water ... It was showing a low hump, I would say about 10 feet long - the length of our boat. It was huge. It was sort of moss brown in colour and smooth with no fins of any kind". He concluded by saying ... "It was some large, living creature, the like of which I have never seen before" (*Helensburgh Advertiser* 2 October 1964). Two weeks after publication of the incident, the same newspaper carried a follow-up story, this time reporting the observations of two railwaymen who had been travelling along Loch Lomondside on the West Highland Line ... "The loch was perfectly clear and calm. We had a perfect view as we came out of the tunnel at Inveruglas and we saw this strange looking disturbance in the water ... It was bigger than a long boat and was moving very fast ... There was a large kind of dark head ... It was far too big to be anything else than a very large creature swimming". At the time of the sighting, neither of the two railwaymen were aware of the earlier encounter in the same locality (*Helensburgh Advertiser* 16 October 1964).

To this day, what it was these four eye-witnesses actually saw breaking the water surface in Inveruglas Bay remains Loch Lomond's most intriguing mystery of them all.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful to Glasgow, Stirling and Dumbaron libraries services for access to the older published works consulted in the preparation of this account. John Gleave of the Drymen & District Local History Society kindly read through and commented on the first draft of the paper.

REFERENCES

- Bord, J. & Bord, C. (1987). *Modern Mysteries of Britain*. Grafton, London.
- Campbell, J.F. (1862). *Popular Tales of the West Highlands* Vol. 3. Edmonstone & Douglas, Edinburgh.
- Colquhoun, Sir J. (1756). An Extraordinary and Surprising Agitation of the Waters: Letter XXII. *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society* 49, 389-390.
- Curran, J.C. & Poodle, T. (1991). 'Hydrological characteristics of Loch Lomond - are they changing?' in *Loch Lomond 1991* pp. 1-21. University of Glasgow & University of Strathclyde conference report.
- Douglas, N. (1971). *A Wee Look at Arrochar*. Reiver Press, Galashiels.
- Gibson, E. (1695). *Camden's 'Britannia'*. London.
- Giles, Rev. J.A. (1842). *The British History of Geoffrey of Monmouth*. James Bohn, London.
- Graham, A. (1724). 'Description of Incheallioch or Buchanan Paroch' in Mitchell, Sir A. (1907). *Macfarlane's Geographical Collections relating to Scotland* Vol. 1, pp. 344-347. Scottish History Society, Edinburgh.
- Hanway, M.A. (1776). *A Journey to the Highlands of Scotland*. Fielding & Walker, London.
- Irving, J. (1928). *Place Names of Dumbaronshire*. Bennett & Thomson, Dumbaron.
- Johnston, Rev. J.B. (1904). *The Place Names of Stirlingshire* (2nd ed.). R.S. Shearer, Stirling.
- Lamond, H. (1923). *Some Notes on two of the fishes of Loch Lomond: the Powan and the Lamprey* (Fishery Board for Scotland Report). HMSO, Edinburgh.
- Lee, J.R. (1913). Excursion to Tarbet and Luss, 23 May 1912. *The Glasgow Naturalist* 5, 76-77.
- Lee, J.R. (1943). Excursion to the Arrochar District, 13 July 1940. *The Glasgow Naturalist* 14, 97-98.
- Lee, J.R. (1946). The Fairies' Lake, 21 May 1945. *The Glasgow Naturalist* 15, 69-71.
- Lumsden, J. & Brown, A. (1895). *A Guide to the Natural History of Loch Lomond and Neighbourhood*. David Bryce, Glasgow.
- MacGregor, A.A. (1927). *Wild Drumalbain*. W. & R. Chambers, London.
- MacKechnie, Rev. J. (1964). *The Dewar Manuscripts* Vol. 1. William MacLellan, Glasgow.
- MacLeod, D. (1884). *Dumbaron, Vale of Leven and Loch Lomond*. Bennet & Thomson, Dumbaron.
- Maitland, P.S. (1983). Loch Lomond's Unique Fish Community. *Scottish Wildlife* 19, 23-26.
- Maitland, T. (1831). *The History and Chronicles of Scotland written in latin by Hector Boece and translated by John Belleden* Vol. 1. W. & C. Tait, Edinburgh.
- Meaden, G.T. (1976). A meteorological explanation for some of the mysterious sightings on Loch Ness and other lakes and rivers. *Journal of Meteorology* 1, 118-124.
- Monipennie, J. (1603). *Certeine Matters concerning the Realme of Scotland as they were Anno Domini, 1597*. John Flasket, London.
- Parsons, E.J.S. (1958). *The Map of Great Britain circa A.D. 1360 known as the Gough Map*. Bodleian Library and the Royal Geographical Society, Oxford.
- Teignmouth, Lord. (1836). *Sketches of the coasts and islands of Scotland etc.* Vol. 2. John W. Parker, London.
- Todd, J.H. (1848). *The Irish Version of the Historia Britonum of Nennius*. Irish Archaeological Society, Dublin.
- Wood, I. (1954). *Loch Lomond and its Salmon*. Scottish Field, Glasgow.